Southern Union, The Lobby Art Space

The exhibition is dedicated to my father, J. Shershevsky (1933-1996), architect and archeologist.

"Why Beersheba?" asks the photographer Pavel Wolberg, one of the artists participating in the group exhibition Southern Union on show at the Lobby Art Space. Over the years Beersheba tends to be described in a critical way: "The image gradually became clearer: Beersheba isn't a city in most of the modern meanings of a place like this [...] Beersheba is the country's non-city," wrote the publicist Gideon Samet in 1992. "Despite its growing population, Beersheba is probably the ugliest and most rundown city in Israel," said the journalist Amir Rosenblat in 1993, who grew up there. The critical gaze describes the city's urban space in terms of lack and negativity, in a way that articulates the gap between the utopian vision of the city planners and the reality, as reflected in Beersheba's urban landscape.

This situation is the point of departure of the exhibition Southern Union, which brings together the works of seven artists all of whom have a biographical link to Beersheba, which they left for life in the center of the country or other places in Israel or abroad. The exhibition sets out to explore the modes of articulation of the aesthetic language in their works in light of this link, elusive as it may be, and to see how their work is affected by the social and political processes the city experienced. The exhibition presents works of various media: a wooden sculpture and a painting on paper by Hava Mehutan; an installation and painting on plywood by Roni Hajaj; and photographs by Gaston Zvi Ickowicz, Pavel Wolberg, Eli Singalovski, Nadav Assor, and Sigal Primor.

Much has been written about Beersheba's urban development in the socio-political context. The city presents a clear example in Israel of a quick transition from a colonialist-modernistic vision to a reality that exemplifies most of the faults this vision brought about. The project began with the seizing of the city during the War of Independence, and the evacuation of the Palestinians and Bedouins, who had been living there since the Ottoman days. The plan, to which David Ben Gurion gave the picturesque title Making the Desert Bloom, included establishing towns in the Negev to put as many Jewish settlements in the area as possible. The project was part of the national master plan headed by architect Arieh Sharon, and it included the national planning of public housing, especially for new immigrants. The overall plan was inspired by the notion of the Garden City developed by the British town planner Ebenezer Howard (1898), which combines clusters of public and residential buildings surrounded by green belts.

The Beersheba plan involved the rapid construction of neighborhoods scattered over large areas and far from each other, with no connection to the Old City, which functioned as an organic commercial center (despite its neglect – due to the official opposition to its Levantine materiality). The neighborhood building plan was based on the period's western modernistic values, themselves part of a socialistic ideology that favors equality among the residents, with the aim of imposing a complex social reality through an organized architectural program. The "dwelling machines" described by Le Corbusier (1923), who defined the notion that upheld modern space design as a tool for community shaping, had a double role here: to seize as much land as possible while reproducing the architectural program, aims that suited the young state's mission in terms of economy, sociality, and identity.

The architectural aesthetic that promotes functionality was therefore manifested in a sparse aesthetic that does away with symbols from the past – diasporic features, ethnic baggage, and bourgeois values – and emphasizes the structure of the building (Brutalist raw concrete) and its role in providing a uniform roof for all ("ethics as aesthetics" – in the words of Sharon Rotbard). This tendency allowed "turning a new leaf" in the "barren" desert for building a "western" society.

The planning of the Beersheba neighborhoods was placed in the hands of architects from the center of Israel, who tried to give the city's first neighborhoods (Alef – Hey) all that they seemingly needed. Each neighborhood was planned according to a different European scheme or idea, thereby creating a city of suburbs with no center, distanced from one another like independent capsules, and also detached from the surrounding desert.

"[...] as is the city so is the human, everything in Beersheba is being built anew. Here we are busy laying the foundations for the future citizen of Israel, who merges different diasporas and creates a united society, a person unburdened by their ethnic singularity. [...] The number of Israeli residents and locals in Beersheba amounts to a quarter of the general population scattered over the various parts of the city [...]. The communities formed by their dwellings in a single neighborhood were dispersed by order over the entire area of the city. Beersheba does not have Turks and Persians, and immigrants from Kurdistan and Persia, here the Beersheba citizen is coming to life. A new spirit is awakening which strives to overcome the reign of ethnicity," so wrote the journalist Yitzhak Yaacobi in 1955 in the journal of the Workers' Union "Local Government" under the title "A City Built on Charred Earth." In reality, in many cases, the plan created polarity between the city's neighborhoods – there were neighborhoods that were "better" in terms of architecture, beside neighborhoods that had none of the necessary infrastructure apart from block buildings or low-level single-family homes. The gardens also had a hard time flourishing and, in many

cases, turned into abandoned areas. “The empty spaces between the buildings only exacerbated the sense of dullness and neglect…,” wrote Yehuda Gradus in the Book of Beersheba. The neighborhoods fast became peripheries of the city, itself a periphery.

Over the years, after new waves of immigration, when public housing had completed its role, construction was privatized and the top-to-bottom socialist architectural ideology bowed to market forces. Perhaps also to compensate for the enforced aesthetic meagerness, the residents reclaimed their cultural and personal expressive means. In the postmodernist climate urban development focused on new neighborhoods of “bnei beitcha” (build your home), in residential buildings constructed by private constructors, in malls and large commercial areas, and in public buildings with a similar ethos. Some of the public brutalist buildings that are not privately owned, such as those of the university and the municipality, were conserved, and so too the Monument to the Negev Fighters by Dani Karavan, which sits atop a hill just outside the city, a symbol of Zionist occupation and settlement.

The rapid development of Beersheba was accompanied by a growth of the surrounding Bedouin population. Apart from its natural aspects, this growth is the consequence of the permanent settlement of nomadic Bedouins, who in the past wandered throughout the Negev, in the area around Beersheba, as part of the urbanization process enforced on them in an attempt to limit their areas of habitation. These colonialist processes still continue, accompanied by severe environmental neglect and unemployment. In the area between Beersheba, the factories in its south and the army bases around it, polluting factories and a national hazardous waste dump (Ramat Hovav) were built, clearly demonstrating the country’s attitude toward the Negev. This brought the city’s connection to its landscape and Bedouin community to a brutal end.

The long walk on foot from one house to another, to one of the city’s cinemas, or to a football match at the city stadium, was part and parcel of the life of those who grew up in the city at least until the 1990s. The gaze of the city pedestrian was a wide, panoramic gaze, linked to the city’s flatness at that time, the pastel shades of its buildings, all carrying a sandy-yellow or grey-concrete hue dotted with sparse greenery. At that time the city resembled an army base, a city after a sandstorm, or a futuristic city. As opposed to streets buzzing with people, shops, busy roads, billboards, and other distinctive features of a modern city, as described by Walter Benjamin in his book Baudelaire, wandering around the Beersheba neighborhoods evoked a meeting with a bland, unrecognizable urban landscape, one that creates alienation, and perhaps calls for introspection.

The movement in space changes rapidly over the years, the move from the crowdedness of the residential block apartments – similar from the outside yet very different inside – to the open, uniform city expanses: all these were a common feature of life in the southern city, as

can be seen in the works of the artists showing in the exhibition. For all of them wandering and looking at the landscape, questioning its meaning is a uniting practice. Quick on their feet, they observe the landscape from a sense of alienation with allows them to isolate their object of observation, and move it toward or away from themselves, despite the surrounding noise, each from their personal angle. They meet the phenomena around them with a realistic, humane gaze, one that is also poetic; with a gaze articulated in their singular aesthetic language.

Gaston Zvi Ickowicz (1974, Argentina), grew up in the Vav neighborhood, and currently lives and works in Jerusalem. His photographs focus on areas of open nature that experience a brutal intervention of official development processes reflecting political and social contexts. His outsider viewpoint looks at the transformations of the landscape as a result of army occupation, and urban or national development. His panoramic gaze, often from a high vantage point, seems like that of a random passerby, yet the compositions and colors give his works a poetic dimension in sharp contrast to the images' realistic character. In the exhibition, Ickowicz presents Beersheba (Landscape), (2010), an image of a dusty desert view captured from the Monument to the Negev Fighters, by Dani Karavan. Here too one feels the gap between the place from which the gaze is cast – a monument for the fighters who died conquering the Negev, and that seen by the eyes: barbed wire and the dunes on which the local Bedouins live beside factories.

Pavel Wolberg (1996, Soviet Union), lived in Hey neighborhood after immigrating to the country from Leningrad until he moved to the center of the country. In his solo exhibition now at Tel Aviv's CCA he is presenting Panoramas – panoramic photographs showing human situations in areas of conflict. Wolberg's works linger between journalistic and artistic photography while focusing on the human aspect, and the complexities that arise in areas of conflict around the world. The realism of the photograph allows the sensitivity of Wolberg's gaze to create a bold aesthetic and sensual experience. Two works by Wolberg are included in the exhibition: a photograph of a window whose lace curtain conceals a typical residential building (Curtain, Beersheba, 2020); and a collage of a checkered notice board with images of women and writings on the wall (Old Man with Model, Kosovo, 2009).

Roni Hajaj (1976, Israel), born and raised in Alef neighborhood, lives and works in Tel Aviv. His work process often starts as a wandering, especially when creating site-specific installations, and in gathering industrial objects. He creates three-dimensional assemblages that evolve and transform through the use of motion-related elements such as wheels, shoes, legs, and objects organized in a way that allows them mobility. In the exhibition, Hajaj is showing a painting (with an image of a wheel) and a reconstruction of an installation from a solo exhibition presented at Raw Art gallery in 2014 – Not Conservation and Not Nothing, an

exhibition that refers to Beersheba and includes items collected from the city's Bedouin market. Hajaj describes his childhood neighborhood as one of cultural diversity – small housing apartments always open to guests and affording transformation, transposition, and absorption into the environment. The work, a grey felt blanket hanging over the floor, recalling a Bedouin tent (and Joseph Beuys's felt works) with three red balls on it, relates to the story of the Biblical Avraham, who hosted the three angels in his tent. It also refers to nomadism and to Bedouin hospitality. The Well of Avraham which links the Biblical father to Beersheba is part of the Zionist narrative used to justify Jewish settlement in the city.

Hava Mehutan (1925–2021) immigrated to Israel in 1964 from Philadelphia and left the city for Carmiel in the 1990s. She lived and worked in the Old City since the 1950s and managed the city's Negev Museum of Art for many years. In interviews, she said that working in Beersheba, far from the country's artistic center, allowed her to work without the influence of outside forces and gave her the opportunity to look at the Negev landscape. "Isolation forced me to look around me and wonder about my feelings and thoughts." Over the years Mehutan dealt with the link between landscape and the female body, while moving between figurative and abstract expressions. She sculpted in wood, stone, and bronze, creating works that emphasized their materiality and link to place. Her works touch on literary and Biblical themes (she participated in the exhibition The Sacrifice of Isaac in Israeli Art, curated by Gideon Ofrat at the Ramat Gan Museum of Art in 1987). Her works in the exhibition are the sculpture Painted Head (1956) and Woman (1993), a painting of a woman figure in blue.

Eli Singalovski (1984, Israel), raised in the Vav neighborhood, left as a young man. Singalovski's first photographic project shows Beersheba while wandering the city streets at night. He took black-and-white photographs of public housing and official buildings using a long exposure. The photographs of the different buildings highlight their similarities even though each one is unique and appears as a flat theatrical façade detached from its surroundings. His photographic space looks like a war zone illuminated by a military helicopter ahead of an attack. The photograph creates an alienation that underlines the gap between the plastic idea of the architectural project and its function as a home, a "dwelling machine." The nocturnal enchantment of brutalist construction is still being developed by Singalovski in other sites in Israel and abroad, including London and Berlin.

Nadav Assor (1979, Israel) grew up in the Hey neighborhood and left as a young adult. In recent years he lives, works, and teaches at Rhode Island University. The images in the series in the exhibition belong to a large collection of sketches and experiments in creating visions while walking across the lands of the northern Negev. The project is in its early stages and continues his previous projects such as Manhor (2008, 2019) and Ground Effect (2016). The point of departure of the process is the exploration of the existing potential in images of the

area. He uses AI to explore potential space between the images in the latent space to find images that will serve him in digital and physical collages and assemblages. Assor walks along an axis of 80 km from the east to west Negev, an area that includes pine forests planted on demolished villages, artificial water reservoirs, military monuments, and graveyards. He scans the land along this route with surveillance equipment such as binoculars, drones, or google earth maps, and creates works that reconstruct the findings with low-tech means such as photographic collages.

Sigal Primor (1961, Israel) grew up in Hey neighborhood. Worked in Tel Aviv before moving to New York where she lives and works. In 2014 Primor presented the exhibition Levanda 56 at the Chelouche Gallery in Tel Aviv in which she created an apocalyptic installation showing the International Style buildings on Lavanda Street buried in ruins, as a metaphor for the destruction of the western social architectural vision. The work relates to the situation of refugees living in the area. A sculpture by Primor Piano/Pianissimo (1989) is permanently exhibited on Chen Blvd in Tel Aviv. Her works touch on the enlargement of formal worlds from modern art and architecture along with domestic and gender motifs. The often hybrid result evokes a distortion and alienation in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp. The exhibition presents four photographs from the series Space Catcher (1983), in which a naked woman is seen in a moment that is perhaps intimate and everyday, or perhaps catastrophic and violent.

Like the artists in the exhibition, I too was born and raised in Beersheba (1961), in the Hey neighborhood and then in the first “build your home” neighborhood. My parents immigrated from Eastern Europe, as young architects, for financial and ideological reasons. They took part in the planning processes of Beersheba, which combine a romantic idea that links the city to the archeology and history of the Negev, along with an awareness of the problems brought on by urban planning. “Beersheba was planned without a central conception, and it lacks urban consolidation. In terms of design, it is unsuitable for the outskirts of the desert, and despite having a population of almost 100,000, it has neither the scale nor the uniqueness of a large city,” wrote my father, Joseph Sharshevsky in 1978.

Orit Mor

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הלובי מקום לאמנות
THE LOBBY ART SPACE